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Vasilika

The Area Surrounding Vasilika

241
[621] The inhabitants of Vasilika, as the village will henceforth be called, are
361 farmers and shepherds. The farmers cultivate the land in the plains adjacent to
[423] the low-lying ridge on which most of the houses are built. As a consequence of the dowry and inheritance system in the region, some of the fields near Vasilika are owned by farm families in neighboring villages, and the Vasilika farmers own some lands in other sections of the Boeotian plain and even in the surrounding foothills. By and large, however, the inhabitants cultivate lands of the
[133] quality characteristic of the Boeotian plains. These lie in East Central Greece,
[134] north and west of the smaller plains of Attica. The flat land of Boeotia is one of Greece's few regions of moist, fertile soil. The Kiphisus river once flowed through the whole area, but earth movements and the porous limestone of the region, which permits underground drainage, have broken the continuity of the river's flow. The upper stream flows through a narrow mountain-bordered valley and then into a wide plain which was once covered by Lake Copais. The river is silt-laden, and the underground channels through which the water escapes tend to get blocked up. The land can not always absorb the waters of the winter rainy season as rapidly as they accumulate. Thus an especially wet winter can flood the fields so badly that they do not drain off in time for spring planting
[312] (Newbigin 1949:333). A system of controlling the waters exists for the land reclaimed by draining Lake Copais. However, the cultivated fields of Vasilika lie some miles past this region, and although the Kiphisus flows through their fields, the farmers have no method of draining off excess water. Consequently,
[134] they watch the winter rains with some apprehension. On the other hand, the regular winter flooding in ordinary years, along with the accumulation of alluvium enriched by humus, makes the soil suitable for two crops of wheat annually and for summer crops such as cotton and tobacco (Newbigin 1949:333).

241 Since the growing season for these last two crops is a dry one, the cotton
312 always requires irrigation and the tobacco sometimes does. The natural under-
[406] ground drainage system makes it possible to drill good wells almost anywhere in the fields, from which water may be drawn by diesel irrigation pumps. Many such wells have been dug and are serving Vasilika's farmers. Within the village itself there are nine wells in regular use. Only an unusually dry year brings any danger of serious water shortage for either ordinary household purposes or for
[363] irrigation. The mulberry trees which line the main village street and the occasional trees which appear here and there among the houses flourish because of the good water table and, in spring and summer, provide a pleasing contrast of dark green to the predominantly brown and orange tones of the village's land and houses.

49 The people of Vasilika, like those on the other plains of Greece, not
621 only have the advantage of larger tracts of more fertile soil but also are consider-
361 ably less isolated than the inhabitants of the mountain villages. As will be seen,
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the easy access to roads and transportation to and from the village has important consequences for its culture and social structure.

The Boeotian plain is bounded by mountain systems and the sea. Running west and north, the Parnis, Kithaeron, and Helicon ranges as well as Parnassos itself separate it from the plains of Attica. The town of Lamia on the small Sperchios plain to the north and the west can be reached only by traversing parts of the Kallidromon and Ghiona mountains. To the east, an extension of the Kallidromon range makes access to the Gulf of Atalanti difficult. But the most important road which runs over and around the mountains and through the plains from Athens to Thessalonika has been paved throughout its length since World War II. It is now a two-lane asphalt highway which serves as a truck and bus route of major importance in the communications system of the country. In most of Boeotia, the highway runs more or less parallel with and not far from the tracks of the Athens-to-Thessalonika railroad.

The village of Vasilika lies on the slope of a low ridge just a half mile off this main highway. Since the summer of 1956, a local bus comes through the main street of the village twice a day, at 6:00 in the morning and at noon.

Going in the direction of Athens, ninety miles distant, the bus passes a British Petroleum (BP) station and restaurant a mile and a half down the road and traverses several villages. Its destination, however, is usually Levadhia, fifteen miles from Vasilika. Levadhia is the provincial capital and marketing center of some 12,000 population. Here bus connections to Athens may be made.

In the opposite direction, the nearest village of some size and importance is Kifisokhori. It lies five miles up the road from Vasilika. Kifisokhori has, among other facilities not available in Vasilika, flour mills, large grocery stores, barbers, doctors, a pharmacy, a movie, and several taxis. Whether they use the bus or load their horses with flour for the mill and walk by way of the shortcut through the fields, the people of Vasilika go most frequently to Kifisokhori.

Further north and off to the west, but only about eight miles past Kifisokhori, is Amphiklia. This town is the seat for tax collections and other governmental financial matters for the fiscal district in which Vasilika is situated. On the 16th of each month, for example, the priests of the village within Amphiklia's jurisdiction gather in the town to collect government salaries. Amphiklia also has a coeducational gymnasium (the approximate equivalent of an American high school and junior college combined). Several boys and girls from Vasilika live in that town to attend the school.

The people of Vasilika can also travel in the direction of the sea. The dirt road which starts at the highway leads to the houses of the village, then becomes the main street, and finally extends beyond the settlement between the borders of the fields and the foot of the ridge on which the village is situated. Never free of ruts, of dust, and in the winter, of mud, the road narrows and deteriorates further as it passes the last village house. Nevertheless, pedestrians, donkeys, horses, tractors, and even, with some difficulty, trucks and buses can get through. Half a mile past the last village house, at the banks of the Kiphisus, this road meets the road to Atalanti. Buses from Levadhia that have turned off

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49 onto the Atalanti road at the BP station will stop here if there are any passengers.
484 The asphalt and dirt roads are not the only routes by which the village can be approached. The local railroad station of Helikon is just a mile up the highway going toward Kifisokhori. Trains from Athens stop at Helikon at least once a day. The train can also be used to reach Kifisokhori. Thus, a resident of Vasilika can reach any of the main towns of eastern Greece with relative ease and at no great expense, even from the standpoint of his own standard of living.

438 The same transportation routes which enable the villagers to leave their
443 homes also enable people and products to enter the village. Itinerant vendors of
484 fresh fish, oranges, tomatoes, ice cream, cloth, crockery, sacred pictures, and the like reach Vasilika over these roads. Tinsmiths, blacksmiths, and cobblers use them to come to set up shop for a day or two near one of the coffee houses. The same roads bring gypsies who occasionally pass through the village to beg and to entertain. On the many occasions when family gatherings are in order, the town relatives of the villagers can reach Vasilika with ease.

487 This description has so far primarily concerned itself with Vasilika's
484 accessibility to town or city centers of commerce, government, and recreation.
49 But there are also paths through the fields and into and over the surrounding hills that lead to the neighboring villages. One can still walk or ride a horse or a donkey to reach these settlements. For the women of Vasilika, these are the important routes. By following them, they can reach the homes of their parents and their daughters, attend the engagements, weddings, and saint's day celebrations in their home villages, and perhaps help out when a daughter has a child. These same paths bring the relatives of Vasilika's women into the village on similar occasions. From the standpoint of the rural economy, this network of
[205] paths permits the movement of farm laborers among the villages. Indeed, it is in this way that the postman walks from village to village carrying the mail.

621 The stress on the many avenues of contact with other people and com-
484 munities available to Vasilika's population should not lead one to imagine a bustling, busy center with a constant ebb and flow of traffic. The exact nature of movement in and around the village can be better understood if the spatial arrangement of Vasilika's buildings is known. Social relations among the villagers are also affected by these arrangements.

Inside Vasilika

361 The ridge, on the lowest slopes of which most of the structures are built,
[49] lies, as I have said, a half mile from the main highway and somewhat parallel to it. The highway runs from northwest to southeast, Vasilika's ridge from northwest to east. To reach the first village structure, one walks north about three-
[346] tenths of a mile on a dirt road leading from the highway. Vineyards and fields are on the right; to the left stands the new one-room schoolhouse built in 1959,
[245] with its play yard and surrounding wire fence. A stand of young pines and another of young cypresses, newly planted by the school children, adjoined the
[764] schoolhouse in 1961. On the road, past the schoolhouse, a little further to the

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Athens-Piraeus region—is no more than about 85,000 souls. In terms of parishes there is considerable disparity between different dioceses: that of Ioannina, in Epirus, one of the largest, includes 230 parishes—many of them mere hamlets of forty or fifty families—while that of Nevrokopi, on the frontier of eastern Macedonia, has only fifteen. The average number is rather less than 100. If we take the twenty-four dioceses of Macedonia and Thrace, for example, we find that the average works out at seventy-eight parishes to the diocese, while the metropolitans of Philippi and Neapolis, Xanthi, Nevrokopi, Eleftheroupolis, Nea Zichni, Alexandroupolis and Hierissos all have less than sixty communities committed to their care, and only five bishops—the metropolitans of Salonica, Drama, Kilkis, Serres and Florina—more than 100.

As against this comparatively low average population and number of parishes one has, of course, to set in the balance the extremely primitive nature of the communications which the Greek bishop can command. To this day the majority of the villages of northern Greece are inaccessible to wheeled transport, at any rate during the winter months; and while the truly remarkable achievements of the last few years—the repair of the shattered railways, and the construction of roads and air-strips—have given Greece a very fair system of long-distance communications, the facilities which most bishops enjoy for travel within their own dioceses remain much as they have been since apostolic days. The metropolitan of a country diocese will think nothing of long journeys by mule or mountain pony across appallingly difficult terrain, his episcopal vestments slung from the high wooden saddle; of fording torrents swollen by the melting snows, and negotiating precipitous slopes where the path seems scarcely to afford adequate foothold for a goat—much less for an elderly ecclesiastic. It is little wonder that many mountain villages saw their father in God but seldom, even in the days before the natural hazards which confronted the traveller had been supplemented by mines and wandering bands of *katsapliades*, as the Communists were styled in the villages.

When we turn to the internal organisation of the dioceses we find many features which cannot but seem strange to most western Christians. We have come to take for granted the fact that a bishop, charged with the pastoral care of a vast and unmanageable diocese, inevitably delegates most of his priestly functions to his parish clergy. In the small country dioceses of Greece, however, the bishop retains a far greater measure of